

UConn Board of Trustees Report – October 23, 2013

President Susan Herbst

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As you may have seen, earlier this week a press conference was held in Hartford that included a group of current and former UConn students who have directed a series of allegations against the university, all revolving around the issue of sexual harassment and assault.

It should go without saying that as an institution, and as individuals, we have nothing but heartfelt compassion for any victim of sexual violence, anywhere.

We prioritize campus safety above all else, and I commend any student who is working to raise awareness and to prevent sexual harassment and sexual assault.

And we urge any UConn student – or anyone – who has been a victim of sexual assault to immediately utilize the many resources that the university has to offer victims.

Numerous allegations were made at Monday’s press conference regarding specific cases.

It must be noted that UConn students, like all U.S. college students – including former students – have federal privacy protections, commonly known as FERPA, that limit the information that we are able to release about them or their time at UConn. FERPA is an acronym for the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

FERPA not only applies to actual student records, but to the information contained in those records. Even though the students publicly discussed their cases at a press conference, that does not allow UConn – or any university -- to do the same. This is challenging for us, because we would like to be as transparent as possible in all we do.

Because of FERPA, the university cannot discuss the facts of any individual case – or many of the specific claims made on Monday – other than in a general way, without a student waiving their FERPA rights.

I will address one specific issue raised on Monday. There are circumstances under which the university should notify a student that another student -- who may have been suspended or expelled from campus -- will be returning, if they are returning.

It is my understanding that this notification did not take place in a case, that occurred three years ago, and it should have. This process was corrected.

That aside, it is vital that the following be clearly understood:

I cannot speak to all 132 years of UConn history, but I can speak to the present, and the two years I have been here.

The suggestion that the University of Connecticut, as an institution, would somehow be indifferent to or dismissive of ANY report of sexual assault is astonishingly misguided and demonstrably untrue.

This is so obvious to those of us who work here and deal with these serious and painful issues that I am stunned that I even have to say it, or that any reasonable person would believe otherwise.

This is a university that is devoting extraordinary resources toward preventing sexual violence in all its forms; to creating a safe environment for our students; and to providing countless resources for victims of sexual crimes. We do this so that they can receive not only the compassion and care they so desperately need, but the justice these insidious crimes demand, based on the evidence.

Knowing that, and knowing the many UConn employees who have devoted their careers to protecting students and aiding victims, I completely reject the notion that UConn somehow

doesn't care about these all-important issues, because nothing could be further from the truth.

I cannot speak to the motivations of people who have suggested this. I can speak to what we as a university do with respect to sexual assault and harassment, including:

- All incoming students and permanent employees receive mandatory training to guide them to assist in preventing sexual harassment and assault, and to recognize and report incidents that do occur.**
- During this fall semester, a Presidential Task Force comprised of a diverse group of faculty, staff and students has been actively working to promote civility, including researching and discussing issues of sexual harassment, assault and student alcohol and drug use as it relates to these issues.**
- We continue to strengthen our comprehensive University Policies, including our Sexual Assault Response Policy and our new University Policy Against Discrimination, Harassment, and**

Inappropriate Romantic Relationships, with the recent addition of a portion banning relationships between faculty or staff and undergraduates.

- **UConn has launched one of the nation's most comprehensive higher education websites on sexual assault prevention and response (www.sexualviolence.uconn.edu) and we're one of the campuses across the nation participating in a pilot "Men Can Stop Rape" international program on campus and the Police-sponsored Rape Aggression Defense Classes (of which I am personally a graduate) to add a valuable new dimensions to our education and prevention efforts.**

Sexual assault and harassment can be found on every U.S. college campus; it is a national issue and one of grave concern. UConn is a national leader when it comes to marshalling the resources needed to combat sexual violence and help victims.

It is something that is vitally important to me as the leader of an academic institution, and, frankly, as a woman. I have spent

the last 25 years fighting for and mentoring other women, always working toward equality and female advancement at each institution I have been at. There is not a single issue I have heard raised this week that I do not have some experience with.

These are national problems, which is why you bring in someone with national experience at multiple institutions, who brings best practices. Due to the glass ceiling, only 14 percent of presidents at great doctoral-granting universities like UConn are women. We are happy to lead on all issues of gender equality as most all of us have done, back since we were young assistant professors.

And I am not alone here. Many of the individuals who lead the key institutional areas that fight sexual assault and assist victims are also dedicated female leaders of UConn. They exemplify our commitment to our students, to the issues involved, and to justice.

It was very difficult this week to hear our UConn police officers painted as uncaring, insensitive and rude. They are the men and women out every day and night working to protect our students, an extraordinarily hard job given this age group. They will continue to do so with a high level of professionalism, no matter the name-calling. They too are human and care about this campus and student body, more than nearly any group, and I hope that you can come to get to know them as I have.

As I said, the university – like all universities -- cannot and will not discuss the specifics of any student’s case without their written approval. This does mean anyone is free to make any allegation they choose to, and we are extremely limited in what we can say in response. I have no intention of responding to any question about a specific student or an allegation that has been made.

But I can address the broad charge of indifference to victims of any crime at UConn: that has absolutely no basis in fact and is a quite serious global charge to make.

To those of you who are new to these issues, you are dropping into a very complicated discussion, and set of social dynamics related to the behavior of young people that has been with us for years. I urge you to go out and read the very best sources, like the Chronicle of Higher Education, to learn about higher ed's challenges, our conversations, and our best attempts at solutions.

There will unfortunately be assaults on this campus and others. No president or police chief will prevent them all, and we should never, ever be so naïve to think so. But we can – as we do here, daily – try to keep our students safe, give them the tools they need to do this, help them with all heroic measures when they are victims, and make all campuses places of civility and respect.

After the public meeting, my colleagues and I will take questions pertaining to our policies or procedures when it comes to sexual assault prevention and assisting victims.

